Sharing without Caring?

Respect for Moral Others Compensates for Low Sympathy in Children's Sharing

Antonio Zuffianò , Tyler Colasante , Joanna Peplak , and Tina Malti

Department of Psychology
University of Toronto

Abstract

We examined links between sharing, respect for moral others, and sympathy in an ethnically diverse sample of 7- and 15-year-olds (N = 146). Sharing was assessed through children's allocation of resources in the dictator game. Children reported their respect towards hypothetical characters performing moral acts. Sympathy was evaluated via caregiver and child reports. Respect and caregiver-reported sympathy interacted in predicting sharing: higher levels of respect were associated with higher levels of sharing for children with low, but not medium or high, levels of sympathy. The motivational components of other-oriented respect may compensate for low levels of sympathetic concern in the promotion of sharing.

Keywords: sharing, respect, sympathy, moral emotions

Sharing without Caring?

Respect for Moral Others Compensates for Low Sympathy in Children's Sharing

Throughout childhood and adolescence, the reciprocal benefits of sharing promote wellbeing and healthy peer relationships (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo, in press). Recent developmental research has shown that moral emotions (i.e., emotions that reflect internalized moral norms and/or other-orientated concerns) play a motivational role in prosocial behaviors, such as sharing (Ongley & Malti, 2014). However, much of this work has focused on the role of sympathy (see Eisenberg et al., in press) as opposed to the joint contributions of distinct moral emotions. We therefore tested the conjoint role of respect for moral others and sympathy in sharing. We chose a sample of 7- and 15-year-olds because the transition from middle childhood to adolescence is characterized by increasingly sophisticated cognitive and affective moral skills and the internalization of moral standards (Malti & Ongley, 2014).

Respect is characterized by *positive* feelings of admiration and esteem towards others based on their desirable attributes (Li & Fischer, 2007). In the present study, we focused on respect for *moral* characteristics because the admiration of other-oriented virtues may prompt children to engage in sharing. Although developmental research on respect is scarce, studies on other prototypical moral emotions (e.g., guilt; see Malti & Ongley, 2014) suggest consistency from middle childhood to adolescence. The objects of respect, however, may shift across development from simple and readily observable forms of moral conduct (e.g., instrumental helping) to complex and abstract moral actions (e.g., sacrificing one's own pleasure for the common good).

Sympathy, on the other hand, is characterized by *negative* feelings of sorrow and concern for others in need. Longitudinal studies demonstrating relative stability from middle childhood to early adolescence attest to its dispositional nature (Eisenberg et al., in press). Sympathy heightens children's attention to the needs of others (thereby motivating them to behave in other-oriented ways) and is thought to play a prominent role in costly altruistic behaviors, such as sharing (Ongley & Malti, 2014). Specifically, sympathy may contribute to sharing by alerting children to others who lack and/or desire the object(s) in their possession.

Positively-valenced respect for moral others and negatively-valenced sympathy likely play differential roles in sharing. Their interrelations in the promotion of sharing, however, are much less clear. Ongley and Malti (2014) found that high levels of guilt (a negatively-valenced and self-oriented moral emotion) compensated for low levels of sympathy in predicting children's sharing, suggesting that other distinct moral emotions may compensate for low sympathy in the maintenance of sharing. In the present study, we tested children's respect for moral others in this compensatory role while accounting for their age, gender, and overall prosocial tendencies. We also analyzed age-related differences in respect, sympathy, and sharing. Based on previous related findings (see Eisenberg et al., in press; Malti & Ongley, 2014), we did not expect age differences in respect and sympathy. Our hypothesis on age differences in sharing, however, was open-ended due to mixed findings with the dictator game (e.g., Almås, Cappelen, Sørensen, & Tungodden, 2010; Ongley & Malti, 2014).

Method

Participants

A sample of 7- (n = 84) and 15-year-olds (n = 62) participated alongside their primary caregivers (N = 146). The families resided in a major Canadian city and came from European

(39%), Asian (20%), Caribbean and South American (10%), Aboriginal (3%), African, (1%), and other (19%) ethnic backgrounds (8% chose not to report). They were recruited by telephone from a pre-existing database. Both children and caregivers were fluent in English. Ethical approval was granted by the researchers' institution.

Procedure

Written informed consent was obtained from caregivers and children provided assent. Children were tested in a designated room while their caregiver completed a questionnaire. Assessments were conducted by trained psychology students.

Measures

Sharing. Children participated in the dictator game (see Gummerum, Hanoch, Keller, Parsons, & Hummel, 2010), in which they were provided six chocolate coins (rather than actual money to ensure age appropriateness; Benenson, Pascoe, & Radmore, 2007; Murnighan & Saxon, 1998) that they could share or not share with an anonymous, hypothetical child of the same age and gender. In line with Gummerum and colleagues (2010), we calculated a proportional sharing score for analyses.

Prosociality. Caregivers rated four items (e.g., "My child shares readily with other children [treats, toys, pencils, etc.]") from the prosocial subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true* to 6 = *always true*; $\alpha = .61$).

Respect for moral others. Children were presented with four stories portraying a gender-matched, hypothetical child being fair, prosocial, socially inclusive, and abstaining from harm. These contexts were chosen based on a pilot study ($N = 21$) of children's open-ended conceptualizations of respect. For each story, children rated their respect for the protagonist on a

4-point Likert scale (1= *do not respect* to 4= *respect*; α = .66). We computed an aggregate of these responses across the stories (factor loadings of a confirmatory factor analysis were above .40).

Sympathy. Caregivers and children rated eight and seven items, respectively, from Zhou, Valiente, and Eisenberg (2003). Caregivers rated items (e.g., "My child feels sorry for others who are less fortunate") on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true* to 6 = *always true*; α= .88) and children rated items (e.g., "I feel sorry for children who do not have toys and clothes") on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = *not like me* to 3 = *really like me*; α = .62).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of study variables by age group. With the exception of child-reported sympathy (7-year-olds being higher than 15-year-olds, $F(1, 138) = 5.58$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$), ANOVAs did not reveal age differences. Since respect was our focal predictor, we ran an in-depth MANOVA on the four story contexts, which indicated that 7-year-olds only reported higher respect than 15-year-olds for the character that abstained from harm, $F(1, 141) = 7.77$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Zero-order correlations indicated that sharing was positively associated with child-reported sympathy ($r = .21$, $p < .05$), caregiver-reported sympathy was positively associated with prosociality ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), and respect was positively associated with child-reported sympathy ($r = .34$, $p < .01$). Gender (girls = -0.5, boys = 0.5) was negatively associated with respect ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$), caregiver-reported sympathy ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$), child-reported sympathy ($r = -.22$, $p < .01$), and prosociality ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$).

Relations of Respect for Moral Others and Sympathy to Sharing

We ran two regression models to predict sharing. The first included respect, caregiver-reported sympathy, and the interaction of respect x caregiver-reported sympathy as independent variables, and prosociality, gender (girls = -0.5, boys = 0.5), and age (7-year-olds = -0.5, 15-year-olds = 0.5) as control variables. Maximum-likelihood with standard errors robust to non-normality was used to estimate parameters in M*plus* 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) because respect deviated from the normal distribution (skewness > |2| and kurtosis > |7|; Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Prosociality (β = .04, p = .71), gender (β = -.09, p = .38), and age (β = -.02, p = .81) were not associated with sharing, but the interaction of respect x caregiver-reported sympathy was (β = -.22, p < .05). The model explained a small amount of variance, Cohen's f^2 = .04. Simple slopes analysis indicated that respect was associated with sharing at low levels of caregiver-reported sympathy (i.e., at exactly -1.6 *SD* below the mean) but not medium or high levels (+1.6 *SD* above the mean; Figure 1).

The second regression included caregiver-reported sympathy instead of child-reported sympathy but was otherwise identical to the first. The interaction of respect x child-reported sympathy was in the expected direction but not significant (β = -.14, p = .14). Finally, we tested respect x sympathy (caregiver- and child-reported) x gender/age interactions; however, none were significant.

Discussion

We examined relations of sharing, respect for moral others, and sympathy in 7- and 15-year-olds. Our focus on moral respect was novel, and few developmental studies have investigated the joint role of distinct moral emotions in sharing. As expected, increases in respect were associated with increases in observed sharing for children with low, but not medium or high, caregiver-reported sympathy. Low sympathy has typically been associated with low rates

of sharing (Eisenberg et al., in press); however, the present findings suggest that high levels of respect for moral others may offset this relationship. In a related study, Ongley and Malti (2014) found that high guilt predicted high rates of sharing when children's sympathy was low. Guilt may motivate sharing by encouraging individuals to abide by internalized moral standards, whereas sympathy likely motivates sharing through concern for the needs of others. These distinct characteristics appear to set the stage for a compensatory relationship in the maintenance of sharing valuable resources. Similarly, the present findings suggest that unique, positive feelings of respect towards moral others may compensate for a lack of sympathetic concern in sustaining sharing.

This compensatory relation was not replicated with child-reported sympathy. Children's self-evaluations are sensitive to contextual factors, whereas adults are more likely to consider children's dispositional attributes (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). Thus, our findings suggest that respect for moral others may compensate for a *dispositional lack of sympathy*, but not situational or context-based lapses. Future studies should include reports from other adults (e.g., teachers) to corroborate our results.

Children's prosociality was unrelated to their sharing. This lack of relation may be due to the nature of our prosociality measure. Specifically, our caregiver-reported prosocial behavior scale was designed to assess children's stable (i.e., dispositional) prosocial tendencies. In contrast, the dictator game measures children's spontaneous sharing behavior, which may be more sensitive to situational factors than adult-reported evaluations.

Our findings did concur with previous studies documenting the mean-level stability of sharing and caregiver-reported sympathy from middle childhood to adolescence (see Almås et al., 2010; Eisenberg et al., in press). Although 7-year-olds reported more sympathy than 15-year-

olds, this might also be explained by the tendency of younger children to rely on situational cues at the expense of capturing their dispositional sympathetic attributes (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). Interestingly, affective ratings of respect were similar in 7- and 15-year-olds. Since the transition from middle childhood to adolescence is characterized by increases in moral-cognitive capacities (Malti & Ongley, 2014), developmental increases in the cognitive components of respect may be more likely. However, analyses by story content revealed that 7-year-olds felt higher respect than 15-year-olds towards the non-aggressive character. Since physical aggression is more frequent in elementary school than middle school (Eisner & Malti, 2015), its salience for 7-year-olds may have been driving this unexpected effect. Although our relatively small sample size did not allow us to systematically test for ethnic differences in the development of moral emotions, previous research suggests that moral emotions are shaped by cultural norms and values (e.g., Krettenauer & Jia, 2013). The role of these norms in children's affective-moral development and other-oriented tendencies needs to be illuminated in future research.

Despite our multi-method, multi-informant approach, the cross-sectional nature of our data prevented us from making causal claims. Furthermore, our effect size was small. Although small effects can have practical importance (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) and our findings support and extend previous research, additional studies on this topic are needed.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the current study adds to nascent literature on the joint contributions of distinct moral emotions to prosocial outcomes. Our compensatory finding between respect and sympathy in the maintenance of sharing highlights the versatility of moral emotions. Children and adolescents are routinely faced with an array of multifaceted social situations involving conflicting moral and amoral concerns. Providing them with an equally

diverse toolbox of moral emotions may help them navigate towards prosocial solutions, even in the event that one particular affective-moral response, such as sympathy for others, is lacking.

References

Almås, I., Cappelen, A. W., Sørensen, E. Ø., & Tungodden, B. (2010). Fairness and the development of inequality acceptance. *Science, 328,* 1176-1178. doi:10.1126/science.1187300

Benenson, J. F., Pascoe, J., & Radmore, N. (2007). Children's altruistic behaviour in the dictator game. *Evolution and Human Behaviour, 28*(3), 168-175. doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2006.10.003

Cohen, J., Cohen, P., West, S. G., & Aiken, L. S. (2003). *Applied multiple regression/correlation analysis for the behavioural sciences* (3rd ed.). Mahwah, NJ US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Curran, P. J., West, S. G., & Finch, J. F. (1996). The robustness of test statistics to nonnormality and specification error in confirmatory factor analysis. *Psychological Methods, 1,* 16–29. doi:10.1037/1082-989X.1.1.16

De Los Reyes, A., & Kazdin, A. E. (2005). Informant discrepancies in the assessment of childhood psychopathology: A critical review, theoretical framework, and recommendations for further study. *Psychological Bulletin, 131,* 483-509. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.131.4.483

Eisenberg, N., Spinrad, T. L., & Knafo, A. (in press). Prosocial development. In R. M. Lerner (Series Ed.) & M. E. Lamb (Volume Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science 7th Edition, Vol. 3: Social emotional and personality development.* New York: Wiley.

Eisner, M.P., & Malti, T. (2015). Aggressive and violent behavior. In M. E. Lamb (Vol. Ed.) and R.M. Lerner (Series Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science, Vol.*

3: Social, emotional and personality development (7th edition, pp. 795-884). New York: Wiley.

Goodman, R. (1997). The strengths and difficulties questionnaire: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 38,* 581-586. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.1997.tb01545.x

Gummerum, M., Hanoch, Y., Keller, M., Parsons, K., & Hummel, A. (2010). Preschoolers' allocations in the dictator game: The role of moral emotions. *Journal of Economic Psychology, 31,* 25-34. doi:10.1016/j.joep.2009.09.002

Krettenauer, T., & Jia, F. (2013). Investigating the actor effect in moral emotion expectancies across cultures: A comparison of Chinese and Canadian adolescents. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 31,* 349-362. doi:10.1111/bjdp.12012

Li, J., & Fischer, K. W. (2007). Respect as a positive self-conscious emotion in European-Americans and Chinese. In J. L. Tracy, R. W. Robins, & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *The self-conscious emotions: Theory and research* (pp. 224-242). New York: Guilford.

Malti, T., & Ongley, S.F. (2014). The development of moral emotions and moral reasoning. In M. Killen & J. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development* (2nd ed., pp. 163-183). New York: Psychology Press.

Murnighan, J. K., & Saxon, M. S. (1998). Ultimatum bargaining by children and adults. *Journal of Economic Psychology, 19,* 415-445. doi:10.1016/S0167-4870(98)00017-8

Muthén, L., & Muthén, B. (2012). *Mplus user's guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Muthén & Muthén.

Ongley, S.F., & Malti, T. (2014). The role of moral emotions in the development of children's sharing behavior. *Developmental Psychology, 50*(4), 1148-1159. doi:10.1037/a0035191

Zhou, Q., Valiente, C., & Eisenberg, N. (2003). Empathy and its measurement. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment*: *A handbook of models and*

measures (pp. 269-284). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10612-017

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

	7-year-olds (n = 84)	15-year-olds (n = 62)
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
Sharing	0.51 (0.18)	0.49 (0.12)
Respect	3.87 (0.34)	3.79 (0.32)
Caregiver-reported sympathy	5.04 (0.63)	5.00 (0.58)
Child-reported sympathy	2.59 (0.38)	2.45 (0.32)
Prosociality	5.16 (0.58)	5.16 (0.52)

Note. Sharing was a proportional score that ranged from 0 to 1. Prosociality and caregiver-reported sympathy were rated on a 6-point Likert scale, child-reported sympathy on a 3-point Likert scale, and respect on a 4-point Likert scale.

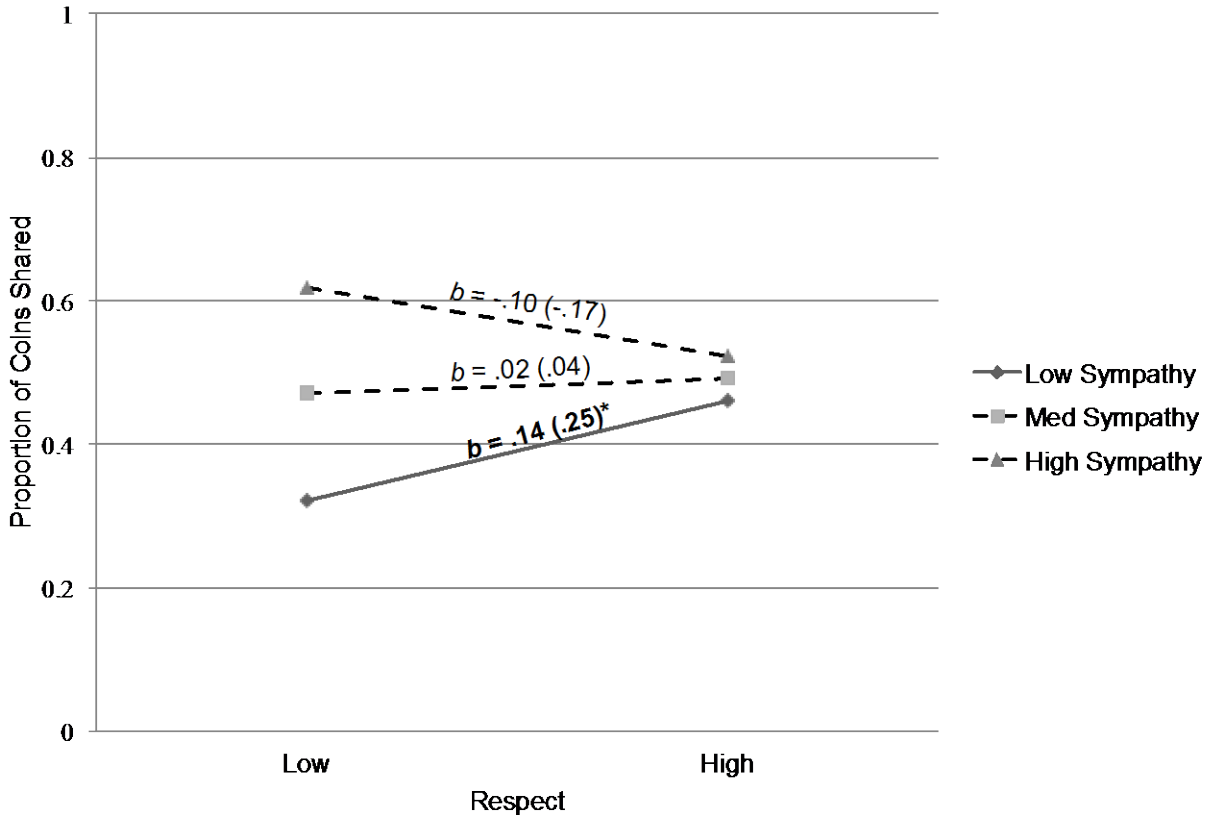

Figure 1. Simple slopes of respect at low (-1.6 *SD*), medium, and high (+1.6 *SD*) caregiver-reported sympathy.

Note. Unstandardized and standardized (in parentheses) beta coefficients are reported for simple slopes. Dotted lines represent non-significant effects. *$p < .05$.